

A Surprisingly Human Experience: Sniper Ghost Warrior 2

written by Berit Ellingsen | August 15, 2014



Many games allow for a bit of sniping, but only under certain circumstances and rarely through the entire game. The tactical shooting game *Sniper Ghost Warrior 2* is one of the few games that promises sniping throughout, plus realistic bullet physics that require the player to adjust for bullet drop, wind speed and wind direction. Since I had recently researched bullet physics for a story, I was curious to see how it would work in a game.

A game, of course, can't simulate all facets of the physics of ballistics. Among the promised challenges of distance, wind speed and wind direction, the game engine only seemed to handle distance and wind speed well. The wind direction indicator was unintuitive and hard to read, and since only the introductory shooting range seemed to be affected by the wind direction, it was also useless.

Strangely, despite having tried to create a game with some realism to the bullet physics, developer CI Games had also added aiming assistance to the Normal difficulty setting, in addition to Easy. I wanted to see how the bullet drop compensation worked, so I didn't use this feature. After viewing a few videos online, I decided that playing on the highest difficulty setting should be doable. I played the shooting range level a few times to get a feel for the bullet physics, then started on the game itself.



Covering them with leaves doesn't make *Sniper Ghost Warrior 2*'s character animations any less awkward.

The game's clunky and stiff graphics immediately marked it as a non-triple A game, with the human models and animations being particularly bad. Perhaps to make up for this, however, the dialogue and voice acting were better than in most games.

Like countless other game heroes, protagonist Cole Anderson is a white guy with dark hair (I have a theory that most game heroes have dark hair to better appeal to an international market). But unlike most game heroes, Cole is a normal-sized human male with normal-sized shoulders, thighs and gun. He can only sprint for a short while before he must slow down to jogging speed, he can climb low walls but doesn't parkour across them, and even though he can swim and dive with all his gear on, he can't stay underwater for minutes on end. If he jumps down from anything higher than a few meters, he dies. The same happens if he takes more than a couple of shots from enemies. I was relieved when I saw him wear a warm knit cap in the game's Siberian DLC

chapter. In that same chapter, Cole fails two out of three enemy interrogations. Just about the only superpower Cole has is the ability to crawl on his belly and crouch-walk for an indefinite amount of time without getting tired.

And that's needed in a game where the AI-controlled opponents can see you from far away and will quickly overwhelm you if they spot you. In the game, I spent as much time crawling flat as walking upright, which to me was fun stealth, and it was a relief not having to go through the frantic firefights that characterize most shooting games.

Also unlike most shooters, *Sniper Ghost Warrior 2* rewards no points or upgrades from killed enemies, not even ammunition, which is instead found in caches inside buildings and caves. Some areas must be cleared completely, but many places, guards can be snuck past. Here, only if you are spotted must you kill all enemies, and often, they overwhelm you so quickly, the only real option is to remain hidden. I thought this was a good idea, as it gives the player the choice to only kill when necessary and avoids the game hero/mass murderer paradox typical of action games.

Most significantly, though, you are not alone. Snipers usually come in pairs: a spotter who calls the shots and measures and gives the distance to the target, and the actual shooter. Thus, for long parts of the game, you have an AI spotter with you, a CIA operative named Diaz. In the introductory level, Diaz teaches the player how to stay out of sight, watch the patrolling guards before shooting, and fire at objects such as barrels and machinery to disrupt and distract.



A screenshot from the game's Siberia chapter.

Cole himself expresses tension when a shot goes awry or he's spotted by guards. "Shit, they're on to me," he whispers, to himself and to the player. Or he says, "Hell, now it's clean-up time." In the sequences in which you protect Diaz from above as he tries to sneak through enemy camps, Diaz's voice becomes more and more tense the longer you take to prepare your shot. There is no doubt that the characters in this game feel fear, even though they are not overcome by it and rarely complain.

More heavyset than Cole and having a deeper voice with a sharper edge to it, Diaz is the second most important character in the game. As your spotter, he knows the way, looks out for patrols, picks the targets, and literally calls the shots. And if you don't follow his directions, he doesn't hesitate to let you know how unhappy that makes him: "Do you want to do this on your own?" Or: "I barely made that. We have to work in sync!"

As such, Diaz is a partner, not a sidekick. But like most secondary game characters, Diaz must be rescued from time to time. I didn't mind rescuing him, though. In the levels he wasn't there, I missed him; I wanted more of

Diaz's sarcastic comments. The only friendly face either person sees during the mission is his partner's, and the banter and teasing between them is one of the best parts of the game. I was surprised at how engaging it turned out to be.

For example, when Cole loses his weapon after a slide down a hillside, during which he barely manages to stop Diaz from going over the cliff, the dialogue is:

Cole: Shit, there goes the rifle.

Diaz: Fortunately, my binoculars are still working.

Cole: That's a nice way of saying, "Cole, get down there and get your rifle back."

Diaz: Hey, you're the hero here. I'm just the spotter.

During the retrieval, Cole is surprised by a patrol, and Diaz tells him to jump into a nearby pond to avoid detection. When Cole comes up for air, Diaz says:

Diaz: How's the water?

Cole: Cold as fuck. Want to try?

Diaz: Nah, I'm not a swimmer. I'll wait here till you get back.

Diaz is not only your spotter; he also happens to be your handler. *Your spotter AND your handler*, I think, *that MUST lead to a betrayal at some point*. I settle in to wait for it, or as Diaz often admonishes, "Waaaaiiitt for eeett..." But the betrayal I expect doesn't happen. Instead, when Cole gets brigged for rescuing their fellow soldiers instead of going for the main objective, Diaz is the one who gets him out, though not without a few sarcastic comments.

The other most prominent character in the game is Maddox, a former spotter of Cole's. In 1993, during the war in the former Yugoslavia (1991-2001), when Cole was much younger and more naive, they went on a dangerous mission together inside Sarajevo. The game presents this chapter of the story as a playable flashback, an example of the "Show Not Tell" strength of games. Cole trusts Maddox in the same way he trusts Diaz, although Maddox is much more impulsive and hotheaded.

"Are you all right, buddy?" Maddox keeps saying. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to you." This does make me suspect that "Mad Dog" Maddox spends entirely too much time thinking about the possibility that something would happen to Cole, and hence, I'm not very surprised when it does. Nevertheless, when Maddox finally returns after many years of absence and sees Diaz, he immediately asks Cole if that's his new spotter and, sounding almost jealous, comments on what a desk jockey Diaz must be.

The 1993 version of Sarajevo isn't modeled with more polygons or more detailed textures than the rest of the game, but for those who have seen pictures from the most recent war in Europe—the shelled-out high-rises, the background of green mountains, and the soldiers and militia groups roaming

the city streets—this part of the game is a dark and eerie recollection.



Sarajevo, 1993

Here is also the most disturbing scene I have experienced in any game in a long time. It takes place in a building facing what was called Sniper Alley. There, snipers shot at everything that moved in order to terrorize the city's inhabitants and prevent them from obtaining food, water, and medicine. In the game, the only way to get through this is to crawl on the belly to get an aim at the snipers on the rooftops all around.

While moving slowly into position, I crept right into the corpse of an old woman sitting propped up by a broken, bloody wall. Behind her was the corpse of an old man, dressed in similar bloody, ragged clothes, with dropped pails and packets around them. The bodies may have been placed just there for the player to crawl into, in full first-person view, but it was nevertheless a horrific and effective reminder that much too often, the casualties of war are mostly civilians, and that while I'm playing a war game, safe and happy in a peaceful country, real wars are in progress all over the planet. This reminder is perhaps the most important thing that representations of war in entertainment can do, if only to negate any romanticizing or propaganda-like tendencies.

Based on the marketing material for *Sniper Ghost Warrior 2*, which relies heavily on the "One Shot One Kill" iconography of the sniper, I went into the game expecting nothing but the barest of stories and simplest of characterizations. Instead, I found a much more complex tale centering on fear, trust, friendship, betrayal, and making the humane choice, even when it's easier and more profitable to do something else; it is these choices that will keep you human even in an inhumane environment. (Similar themes appear in the game's solid DLC chapter, *Siberian Strike*, which describes how Diaz and Cole met.) It's easy to get the impression that, however much Cole has had to pay for his choices after Sarajevo, Maddox's selfish callousness has eaten him up from the inside until there isn't much left, and that this is partly why he regards Cole with such contempt when they meet again. We do get a tiny glimpse into the reasons why Maddox did what he did, but it's too short and insubstantial to elicit any real sympathy.



The game does have a few beautiful moments.

I definitely didn't expect a tale with such a clear sense of ethics and such human characters in a military shooter. That, along with the harsh reminder of the true price of war in the Sarajevo chapters, made for a very positive surprise. Combined with some appropriately harsh game mechanics on the highest difficulty setting, these aspects make *Sniper Ghost Warrior 2* more

worthwhile than many games made for a lot more money and with a much bigger marketing budget.